DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 049 834 PS 004 634

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TITLE	Has Preschool Compensatory Education Failed?
INSTITUTION	High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, Mich.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Child Development (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	69
NOTE	9p.; Paper presented at the 1969 National Head Start Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Compensatory Education, Curriculum Planning, *Educational Research, Home Visits, Language Enrichment, *Preschool Evaluation, *Preschool Programs, *Student Teacher Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	Head Start

ABSTRACT

Discusses evaluation of preschool compensatory education programs and reviews research literature. Suggests that the following ideas are crucial for effective preschool education (1) children can profit intellectually from any preschool curriculum that is based on a wide range of experience; (2) the primary role of curriculum is to help the teacher to teach; (3) the selection of curriculum is critical, for one that is too easy and limited in scope will not challenge the teacher; and (4) staff involvement is more important than the particular curriculum used, and necessary ingredients include planning time for teachers, systematic language interaction between teacher and child, and home visits by teachers. An overview of research in the field of preschool education is also given in this paper. [Filmed from best available copy.] (NH)

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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
Office of Child Development

HAS PRESCHOOL COMPENSATORY EDUCATION FAILED?*

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Although preschool education has been offered to young children for many years, wide-scale compensatory preschool programs are an innovation developed in the last ten years. The current preschool efforts were first proposed by a number of researchers concerned with the many lower-class and minority group youngsters failing to achieve the normal level of expectation in regular school programs. The basic assumption was that these youngsters, primarily from lower socio-economic groups, were deficient in their abilities to manage the academic and personal discipline required for normal school programs. Implicit in this assumption was the identification of the child as the reason for failure in school, of the parents for failure to provide adequate child rearing and socialization processes, and of the minority group cultural milieu for the failure to provide supportive structures to the child and his family to permit the essentials of child rearing to occur. Little thought was given to the problems that the middle-class institution of school and the process of achieving in an essentially middle-class curriculum could present to a culturally different child.

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In the early sixties the case for employing preschool education as a method of compensatory education for young children was founded upon a belief in its potential and not upon fact. The pioneering work of Wellman, Skeels, Skodak, and others at the Iowa Child Welfare Station had been largely forgotten and smugly discreted by academic psychologists and statisticians. Skeels' (1966) amazing thirty-year follow-up study of one small group in the early Iowa series was not published until 1966. Most of the preschools in operation in the early sixties were to be found on college campuses serving as laboratory schools for young children of upwardly striving college professors or in suburbia as cooperative nurseries for children of middle-class mothers. Day-care centers for children of the poor were few and far between and generally provided "care" not education. The only major preschool education research study was one published by Kirk (1958). His study was a broad project covering many handicapping conditions and employing an ill defined diagnostically based curriculum. He found that children from

*Invited address, 1969 National Head Start Conference in New Orleans, La.

disadvantaged homes and without obvious physical reasons for being mentally retarded could possibly be aided through preschool education. Reviews of preschool research of the early sixties were frankly discouraging. These reviews by Fuller (1960), Sears and Dowley (1963) and Swift (1964) indicated, at least for middle-class children, that on the whole, there is no difference on any characteristic or dimension between control and experimental groups by the time the groups reach third grade.

In 1965 a major new element entered the preschool education situation. Responding to increasing national social conscience as a result of minority group militancy to "do something," Head Start was initiated in the summer with 500,000 children enrolled at a cost of over $90,000,000. Head Start, it was promised by some, was going to help poor childrer do as well as middle class affluent children in school . . in eight weeks. While the research data supporting preschool education as an effective tool for aiding children was still basically non-existant, the rising social imperatives could no longer wait. The rationale for Head Start came from men like Hunt (1961) who summarized the interaction theory of intelligence (an individual develops intellectual ability as a product of interaction between himself and the environment) and Bloom (1964) who documented the theoretical significance of early childhood for total child development. Relegated to the background was the nagging problem of genetic potential as the determining limit in general intellectual and functional levels. "Wait until the child is ready before you begin to teach; children can't read until they have a mental age of at least six years; and don't bother trying to educate those poor children you can't change the way they think" were all pieces of advice Head Start chose to ignore.

Along with Head Start came, perhaps, its greatest contribution; the opportunity for real parent involvement in decision making. For the first time educational and research professionals began to hear that perhaps it was the system of education that was at fault for the failure of the child to succeed rather than the parents and their culture. The parents raised other questions as well, most of which are not solved at this time and probably will not be solved in the near future-- questions such as--what instruments are culturally fair enough to be employed that will be a good educational experience for the child and, at the same time, will permit him to remain within the cultural system valued by his parents rather than be dominated by middle-class culture? As one noted black educator said at a meeting on a Saturday morning to a distinguished group of academic types,"Do you think I want my kids to grow up to be like you?" Head Start gave parents an opportunity to be an effective force in the

education of their child. Professionals from now on must take this articulate and determined force rightfully into their councils and satisfactorily meet legitimate demands. If a parent can't understand an explanation, it is the professional jargon that is in error, not the parent's comprehension.

Given this great social impetus for educational change and the crucial role early education plays in the overall design, it is reasonable to assume that today, after almost a decade of research based on Head Start and other preschools, findings would support the enthusiasm. Not at all. Indeed, while the case for preschool education as a method for aiding young children was founded upon a belief in its potential and not upon fact, the extension of these programs has been based upon firm evidence of their general ineffectiveness. Two studies are of importance in documenting this point, the Westinghouse study (1969) and one by Hawridge, Chalupsky, and Roberts (1968). The Westinghouse study was an attempt to look at the overall impact of the nationwide Head Start program. It grouped many local projects together and did not designate projects by particular style of operation, type or extent of education offered in the program, use of professionals or paraprofessionals; nor did it use other methods of identifying potentially different programs. The findings cast firm doubt on the measured impact of the Head Start early education programs in terms of the stated goals for those programs. The study may have asked the wrong questions, it may have used the wrong measures, it may have depended upon poor data-gathering procedures; but its findings are in direct agreement with other, less broad reviews (Weikart, 1967, Gray, 1969). Indeed, one does not have to look far to find similar studies which have produced parallel results in closely allied fields. The Coleman (1966) report found that once you have accounted for the socio-economic status of the pupil you have predicted with considerable accuracy how well the youngster will do in school regardless of what particular school program he attends.

A major criticism of these studies has been in the way the data were gathered, a problem generated by their very size. The studies have been too broad in grouping of projects and have neglected to identify those which might be successful if viewed individually. In short, the suggestion has been made that an appropriate study would be to select only successful projects and look at them to see if the conclusions might be different. A recent review by the American Research Institute did just that. Hawkridge, Chalupsky, and Roberts (1968) reviewed data of compensatory programs covering preschool through 12th grade for the period 1963 to 1968. They looked at a sample of over 1000 projects nominated from throughout the country. They found only 21 compensatory education programs which met a criterion of statiscally significant data from im-

proved intellectual or academic functions.

There is another way to consider the development of preschool education programs. By looking at the issues of preschool program development and identifying successful practices one can find considerable guidance for the development of adequate preschool education programs which, when finally filtered into general practice, have good potential for dramatically altering the general research findings discussed so far.

One of the major debates in preschool education over the past ten years has been over the type of curriculum to be employed in the education of the children enrolled in the program. There are two basic viewpoints. The dominant view is that of the traditional preschool educator group. This position is best characterized as child-centered and permissive. Sears and Dowley (1963, p. 814) summerize the traditional methods as"... watching and waiting for the child's needs to emerge and (to) determine the timing of different activities..." The specific aims of the traditional nursery program are:

1. Meeting organic needs and establishing routine habits: Eating, elimination, sleeping, washing, dressing, undressing.

2. Learning motor skills and confidences: Climbing, running, jumping, balancing; learning to use the body effectively.

3. Developing manipulatory skills: Using scissors, crayons, paste, paints, clay, dough, etc.; building with blocks, working with puzzles, beads, tying, buttoning.

4. Learning control and restraint: Listening to stories, sitting still, reacting to music, etc.

5. Developing appropriate behavior: Independence-dependence in adult-child relations; coping with fear, angry feelings, guilt; developing happy qualities, fun, humor, healthy optimism.

6. Psycho-sexual development: Identification, sex-role learning; formation of conscience.

7. Language development.

8. Intellectural development: Cognitive learning; concept formation; self-understanding and self-esteem; creativity; academic subject matter.
(Sears and Dowley, 1963, p. 822)

The alternate position is held primarily by researchers new to the early education field. It is best characterized as oriented toward structured programming and is usually based on specific theory. The typical structured program is a carefully sequenced presentation of teacher-planned activities drawn from a specific developmental theory. An obvious theory choice would be Piaget's or Guilford's among others. The primary goals are generally cognitive and language development. While some structured programs may utilize traditional nursery school materials and activities, others may turn directly to the task of teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic without even a nod toward traditional nursery school format. In a structured program the teacher is generally expected to understand how the activities will be used to achieve predetermined goals, and her teaching methods may range from the more traditional reliance upon general social controls to some of the newer behavior modification techniques.

The vast majority of preschool programs subscribe to the principles of traditional nursery education. It is these traditionally oriented programs within Head Start and elsewhere that have produced the data indicating the lack of success in the early education of disadvantaged children.

Since 1962, there have been a number of structured preschool education programs in operation. (Klaus and Gray, Karnes et al., Deutsch, Hodges, McCandless and Spicker, Sprigel, Weikart, etc.) These projects have followed different child development theories and have been organized around diverse teaching strategies. The central theme of each, however, has been the careful sequencing of activities. While not uniformly successful, the data from these projects have been encouraging in terms both of their immediate measurable impact and long-term gains in academic performance. Several of these projects were reported to be successful in the Hawkridge study. While there is little theoretical agreement among these researchers as to what constitutes a good nursery school program, they do agree that systematic teaching is essential.

In an effort to test which of two well-developed representative structured programs was most effective in meeting the needs of disadvantaged children, the Ypsilanti Preschool Curriculum Demonstration Project was established in the fall of 1967. The programs selected were a cognitively oriented curriculum and a language training curriculum.

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The cognitively oriented curriculum had been developed over the previous five years by the Ypsilanti Perry Preschool Project (Weikart, 1967, 1970). This is a carefully structured program specifically designed for use with disadvantaged children who are functionally retarded. It is based on methods of "verbal bombardment" of our own design, socio-dramatic play as defined by Sara Smilansky, and principles derived from Piaget's theory of child development. The language training curriculum was developed by Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) at the University of Illinois. This curriculum is task-oriented, employing many techniques of language, arithmetic, and reading. In order to complete the spectrum, a third program was established that would represent the traditional, or child-centered approach to preschool education. This program is the unit-based curriculum, emphasizing the social-emotional development goals and teaching methods of the traditional nursery school.

You can imagine the amount of thinking required when the data from a thoroughly predictable research project (that our curriculum would work here) fail to fulfill the expectations of the researchers. Basically what happened is that the findings indicated no differences among the three curricula on almost any of the many measures employed in program assessment. Each program did outstandingly well on all criteria. We tried very hard to locate differences through the use of several intelligence tests, classroom observations, teacher ratings, observations of children in free play settings, independent examiner ratings, and outside critics. Our conclusion is that the uniform conditions required for the operation of an experimental project are far more potent in generating the outcome than the particular curriculum employed.

Now I would like to leave the safety of research findings and try out some ideas that I think are going to be crucial for effective preschool education. If I were planning a program for preschool education these are some of the areas I would spend most of my time thinking about.

1. Broad curricula are equivalent. As far as various preschool curricula are concerned, children profit intellectually from any curriculum that is based on a wide range of experiences. In almost the sense that Chomsky (1966) uses in talking about the development of linguistic competence, a child has the potential to develop cognitive skills and good educational habits if he is presented with a situation which requires their expression. Kohlberg (1968) concludes that a child needs broad general forms of active experience for adequate development of his cognitive abilities; a variety of specific types of stimulation are more or less functionally equivalent for development. In short, no specific

curriculum has the corner on effective stimuli, and children are powerful enough consumers to avail themselves of what the market offers.

2. The curriculum is for the teacher not the child. The primary role of curriculum is (1) to focus the energy of the teacher on a systematic effort to help the individual child to learn, (2) to provide a rational and integrated base for deciding which activities to include and which to omit, and (3) to provide criteria for others to judge program effectiveness so that the teacher may be adequately supervised. The successful curriculum is one that permits this structuring of the teacher to guide her in the task of interaction with the theory she is applying on the one hand, and the actual behavior of the child on the other. An unsuccessful curriculum is one that permits the teacher to give her energies to areas unrelated to her interaction with the child within the theoretical framework or fails to give her clear guidelines for using her time in planning, in interaction with children, and in availing herself of critical supervision. The global and imprecise nature of the traditional preschool curriculum may explain why the master teacher's careful observation of the child and intuitive response to his needs is so successful, while the typical teacher, lacking structured guidelines, mistakes efficient organization at best and systematic neglect at worst for creative education.

3. The selection or development of a curriculum is a critical decision. A curriculum that is too easy or limited in scope will not challenge the teachers and will fail in its function of demanding the teacher's maximum effort. In the long run, it may be that the current focus on "script" type curricula by some structure-oriented curriculum developers will produce as sterile a range of programs as the traditional curriculum people have produced, since the teacher in such programs is not given the room to make the curriculum actively her own. As effective as some of these programs currently are, they must stand the test of how teachers will respond after several years of following the "script." As Huxley said, "In the nature of things, machinery that if foolproof is also inspiration-proof, spontaneity-proof, and virtuosity-proof."
(A. Huxley, 1965)

A staff must be free to develop or employ any dynamic curriculum that it believes will match the needs of the children so long as that curriculum provides adequately for staff involvement and facilitates the type of program operation desired. The process of creating and the creative application of a curriculum, not the particular curriculum selected or developed, is what is essential to success. In preschool education

the process of re-inventing the wheel is important not for the wheels produced but for the learning the process engenders.

4. The staff model is more important than the particular curriculum employed. While competent administrative direction and a good curriculum are important to achieving success, staff involvement is crucial. The staff model employed must allow each individual to be creatively involved in the total operation. In an almost romantic sense, the human involvement of concerned teachers and staff is the key element in program success. To achieve such involvement, a project must provide adequate time for the staff to plan what they are going to do within the restrictions demanded by the particular curriculum, and it must provide for adequate critical supervision by experienced personnel.

Planning time gives the staff an opportunity to bring each child into clear focus, to schedule their own actions to help the child toward the next stage of development, and to debate the theory of the curriculum. Critical supervision must be provided to support the teachers in educational and operational problems, to give them "advice and comfort" in coping with the administrative structure, to facilitate their participation in decision making, and to administer inservice training in curriculum theory. The supervisor raises questions for the staff concerning the general operation of planning and teaching functions. She is the "referee" for problems within the team, bringing them out into the open rather than allowing them to be smoothed over. Since genuine program difficulties with individual children and among staff are the basis for program improvement, to smooth over problems is to avoid the opportunity they provide.

Two more elements can be included in this list. First, language input along some organized dimension is a key factor in successful preschool curriculum. Programs that do not make provision for systematic language interaction between teacher and child have been singularly ineffective.

Second, parent involvement through home visits by teachers seems to be important not so much for transfer of information or experience to the mother but as an attempt to create an atmosphere of support for intellectual growth in the home.

The answer to the question, Has preschool compensatory education failed? is clearly yes when we look at the available research data. But it is clearly evident from a close examination of that data that preschool need not have failed. The responsibility for action is still ours.

Perhaps it can all be expressed this way. The other night the Supremes and the Temptations had a television color spectacular. Crunched in among all the fluff was a song that had a powerful refrain: "The rhythm of life is a powerful beat." That seems to be the message from the experience of preschool education. We are properly concerned with what we teach, how we organize the environment and ourselves to reach the goals we set, and how we evaluate our programs almost in spite of our penchant for theoretical and methodological debates, the rhythm of life persists. if we adults exercise our responsibility to provide the best educational opportunities for young children in step with the rhythm of their lives, then the chances are good that we will not fail.